

By email only to: comments@susdev.org.hk

Council for Sustainable Development
46/F, Revenue Tower
5 Gloucester Road
Wan Chai, Hong Kong

12th October 2016

Response to the public engagement on the Promotion of Sustainable Use of Biological Resources

Introduction

I welcome your Council addressing on this topic. I hope this will lead to mapping-out, testing and implementing strategies for fostering behavioural change which leads to less unsustainable consumption.

I am writing this note because the 'Individual Consumer' questionnaire, which I have completed, does not allow for in-depth comments. For example, Question 9 asks one to rate the importance of different education and publicity actions in promoting sustainable consumption of biological resources. However value of the actions vary according to how they are implemented:

- 1) Some actions should be actioned all the time. For example:
 - a. Providing a website with clear, up-to-date information on sustainability challenges and actions which can be taken.
 - b. Systematic ongoing coverage of sustainable consumption in school curricula.
- 2) Other actions such as advertising and exhibitions are best done as campaigns from time to time to raise awareness of particular issues.

The remainder of this note gives a more in-depth response on points I believe to be particularly important.

How to promote the sustainable use of Biological Resources?

1) Governance.

Long-term progress on sustainability requires a durable governance structure. Part of being durable is starting with modest steps and systematically working for continuous improvement. Early 'easy wins' help build momentum and inspire further action.

2) Establish a round-table on sustainable consumption with subgroups for different products such as seafood and paper.

This roundtable might be under the Council for Sustainable Development. It should bring together constructive individuals from business, academia and NGOs to work with Government representatives to facilitate the initiatives to reduce unsustainability. For example, it should bring together producers and large consumers of various products to solve 'chicken and egg' problems¹ which sometimes impede introducing more sustainable products.

3) Focus the 'HK Green Label' on endorsing 'good' international eco-labels.

Eco-labels can be an excellent tool for informing the public which products are more sustainable and which businesses operate more sustainably. But HK is small and buys from many countries leading to a wide variety of eco-labels. This makes it difficult for the Hong Kong public to recognise eco-labels and know which have acceptable sustainability standards.

The HK Green Council which runs the 'HK Green Label' already uses it to endorse a few eco-labels from other countries. This approach could be greatly expanded with most eco-labels used on goods imported into Hong Kong being checked and, if appropriate, endorsed. The public can then look for the HK Green label rather than learning about international labels. Further, the HK Green Council can:

- a) Give a 'Star' rating to each eco-label depending on how eco-friendly its panel of 'experts' judge them to be.
- b) Set up a website which explains each eco-label and its merits. This would link to the eco-label's own website.
- c) Put a QR code next to the HK Green Label on each product to make it easy for consumers to access the relevant page of the HK Green Label website.

The Government should fund this effort and advertise its results.

¹ By 'chicken and egg' problem I am referring to a situation where suppliers will not supply the more sustainable goods as they are not confident there is sufficient demand while purchasers do not specifically request these goods as there is inadequate supply at reasonable prices. In such cases, procurement commitments by the Government and large companies can help establish a market.

4) Focusing on what businesses can do.

- a) Businesses design their products and select the material used. They can thus have a much greater impact than consumers on improving the product sustainability.
- b) Distribution businesses such as shops can exercise considerable influence through 'Choice Editing' the products they handle. For example:
 - i) The decisions that shops make on which products to stock determine what the consumer can buy.
 - ii) At restaurants you can only eat what is put on its menu. Further, how items are presented on the menu can guide you to more sustainable choices.
- c) Government should initially encourage and later require companies to make an annual statement on the extent to which their businesses use biological resources. Where these uses impact a significant sustainability concern this annual statement should include:
 - i) How the action they have taken this year compares with previous commitments they made.
 - ii) Commitments they are making to reduce the adverse impact of their future use of biological resources.

For listed companies this reporting requirement might be part of the HKSE's ESG Reporting Guidelines.

A company's reputation is important to its success and is therefore a powerful motivator for action.

5) Open source data and mobile Apps can enable consumers to understand and influence the performance of businesses which provide goods and services.

The Government should facilitate consumer pressure for sustainable use of biological resources by requiring businesses to put information into publicly accessible databases. Academics, businesses and other members of Civil Society can access this data to research sustainability trends and provide Apps for consumers to use. One example:

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department could make it a licensing condition that restaurants and hotels include information about how the fish they serve is sourced; as well as whether shark's fin is served. (To reduce the burden of compliance, this could be a requirement for dishes above a certain price, say, \$100 per serving.) Civil Society can then use this data to provide Apps on the sustainability of seafood restaurants.

6) **Overall progress reports.**

The Government should produce a combination of ad-hoc reports on specific issues and an annual 'stocktake' report providing an overview with quotes the ad-hoc reports. The annual report should note progress on areas which have been prioritised and advise on future priorities.

To repeat: The key to substantive action to reduce unsustainable use of biological resources is a governance structure which facilitates continuous improvement by business and civil society.

J Robert Gibson

Adjunct Professor; Division of Environment; HK University of Science and Technology

Fellow; Civic Exchange

Mob: (852) 6077 2975 Email : gibswong@gmail.com rgibson@ust.hk